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Teams put Lego robots on course

Rebecca S. Green | The Journal Gazette

In an atmosphere as noisy as any sporting event at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne's Gates Center on Saturday, hundreds of middle school students focused all their attention on pint-sized robots.

While their parents and teammates screamed and cheered, the students tweaked the programming, adjusted the attachments and crossed their fingers as their Lego robots navigated table-top obstacle courses, scoring points for the teams in the 10th annual Indiana First Lego League Championship.

And while the little robots are far from the world-destroying, chrome-covered Cylons of science-fiction television, organizers hope the process of building them, programming them and watching them perform will sow the seeds for a lifetime of interest in science, technology and engineering.

Saturday's competition featured 48 teams from around the state. The winner, the Bremen Botz! team of Bremen, will go on to a national invitational tournament.

The middle school program features 15,000 teams worldwide, according to Paul Gudonis, president of First, the organization behind the competition. First's goals are to inspire young people around the world to become interested in science and technology, to become heroes in the "sport of the mind," he said.

All of the teams focused on addressing "smart transportation," building robots using Lego's NXT kit, said John Davis, a teacher at Creekside Middle School in Carmel.

Mark Hellinger, an eighth-grader at St. Joseph and St. Elizabeth Catholic School, competed with other members of Boy Scout Troop 300 on a team aptly named "City of Fort Wayne Department of Robotics."

He enjoys the robots, but he also loves being around other kids interested who share interests with him.

Hellinger's teammate, Daniel Romary, an eighth-grader at St. John's Catholic School in New Haven, likes the



The tournament featured 48 teams from around Indiana. Each team used a robot made from Legos to travel a miniature course.



Photos by Clint Keller | The Journal Gazette

Mary Alice Ferguson, left, and Kate Frazee, members of the Electron Girls, compete in the 10th annual Indiana First Lego League Championship on Saturday at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne.

learning aspect of the project and that thrill of getting the robot to do what they want it do.

Their robot wasn't behaving too well in the early rounds Saturday – not backing up when it was supposed to and getting itself stuck.

But how the competitors respond – figuring out how to fix it and make adjustments in the two minutes and 30 seconds allowed to navigate the table-top exercise – is part of what draws Don Snyder, the team's coach, to the program.

In their first round, nervous hands caused a part to not fit correctly, so between rounds, the boys adjusted the part and some of the programming to help it run more smoothly.

"Rarely can you put a kid under pressure and it's still fun," Snyder said. "They have to think the problem out."

But while they have to solve the problems under pressure, it cannot be solely instinctual and must involve an analytical process.

Allen County Recorder John McGauley calls the robot competition one of his favorite days of the year.

A judge for the project portion of the competition for the past few years, McGauley said the kids propose solutions to problems without fear of sounding crazy.

"It is genuinely refreshing to come out here every year and see that what people think about kids is just dead wrong," he said.

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Top finishers

1. Bremen Botz!, Bremen
2. (tie) NXT Generation Christians, St. John
2. (tie) Loco-Motion, Munster

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